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NF01-499 Tips for Eating Out

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Tips for Eating Out

By Linda Boeckner, Extension Nutrition Specialist

To make healthy choices when you eat out, use the Dietary Guidelines for Americans to pick up some tips on ordering foods at a restaurant.

Let the Pyramid guide your food choices. One of the basic suggestions of the Pyramid is to eat a variety of foods. Make food selections to fit in the five basic food groups: breads and grains, vegetables, fruits, dairy, and meat and meat products. Study the menu and ask a few questions. One of the key questions is, "How is it prepared?"

Watch your portion sizes. Today's restaurants typically serve more than the recommended portion size on many of their entrees. For example, a plate of spaghetti that you might order could be two, three, four times or more than the recommended half-cup serving. Think of foods that will be served and then visualize the appropriate serving size. For example, a three-ounce portion of meat is about the size of a deck of cards. Make a commitment to stick to that serving size.

If you have difficulty leaving food on your plate, split a portion with a fellow diner; ask the wait person if a smaller portion can be served; or ask to have the remaining food packed to take home. Also, you may leave a friendly note that even though the food is excellent you would prefer a more reasonable portion size.

Choose a variety of grains daily, especially whole grains. Look for rice and pasta dishes. For extra fiber, request whole grain breads, rolls, and crackers.

Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables daily. Hearty bean and vegetable soups are becoming more common and are filling. Fruits and vegetables are other good ways to add fiber to your meals. Green vegetable salads are usually available on any menu and are nice additions to meals.

Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat. As you read the menu or make inquiries about how the food is prepared, pay attention to phrases that indicate lower fat preparation:

- steamed,

- in its own juice,
- garden fresh,
- broiled,
- roasted,
- poached.

Phrases or words to treat with caution are:

- buttery, buttered, in butter sauce,
- sauteed, fried, pan-fried, crispy, braised,
- creamed, in cream sauce, in its own gravy, hollandaise,
- au gratin, Parmesan, in cheese sauce, escaloped,
- marinated in oil, basted,
- casserole, prime, hash, pot pie.

Other ideas to reduce the fat level in foods are:

- Order salad dressing on the side so you can control what goes on the salad or ask if they serve a low fat dressing. Lemon juice or vinegar by themselves also are salad flavor enhancers.
- Ask for butter, margarine and sour cream to be served on the side of your mashed or baked potatoes, rather than on top. Use salsa as a topping.
- Request vegetables without added fat.
- Request low-fat or skim milk.
- Avoid spreads for your bread and rolls. If you use butter or margarine, spread them lightly.
- Order fruits, sherbet or gelatin for dessert or share a richer dessert with a friend.
- At a salad bar, sparingly use salads that are made with a sauce or dressing such as pasta or potato salads. Reduce use of salad dressings, bacon bits, and seed or nut toppings.
- Trim visible fat from meat and remove the skin from poultry before eating.

Choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugar. Monitor your consumption of desserts and pastries. The salad bar is also a place for sugar-rich foods. Many "super" salad bars have puddings, several kinds of gelatin salads, fruit desserts, canned fruits in syrup and ice cream sundaes.

Beverages such as soft drinks and fruitades are other sources of sugar. Remember that water is always a good drink selection. Lemon or lime slices make water extra refreshing and satisfying.

Choose and prepare foods with less salt. Just as in home dining, control salt intake by controlling your use of the salt shaker. Foods with extra sauces such as cocktails, cheese or tomato sauce may have a higher sodium count. Pickled items, smoked or cured foods and soups are other foods that tend to be high in sodium. Ask for condiments, sauces and dressings to be served on the side to limit your sodium intake.

If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation. Pre-determine your options and plan how you will handle alcoholic beverages for each dining-out occasion. Keep in mind that alcoholic beverages are a source of calories but not a good source of nutrients.

Choose Restaurants that Meet Your Health and Enjoyment Needs

If you eat out often, develop a list of restaurants that provide enjoyment as well as meet your health needs.

Once you have identified restaurants that provide food choices that contribute to your long-term health, make them "regulars" on your eating out route. This works even for "fast food" restaurants.

In addition, food service establishments are usually happy to hear what patrons want to eat. Politely ask for items like skim milk, broiled meats and whole grain breads, or whatever fits your personal dietary needs. If restaurants have made positive dietary changes, let them know you appreciate the new changes.

Specialty Foods

In Oriental foods, go easy on soy sauce and some of the soups. Inquire about the use of monosodium glutamate (MSG). Ask questions about preparation to learn if foods are deep-fried. Steamed rice is lower in fat than pork-fried rice.

The bean and rice dishes of Mexican cookery enrich your eating with starch and fiber. Refried beans, however, are often made with lard, a saturated fat. Ask how food is prepared.

In pizza restaurants, consider pizzas with many different vegetables as toppings. They have more bulk and are filling. Double toppings of cheese provide extra fat and sodium you may not want.

A Word About "Fast Food"

Even in a fast food restaurant, you can make healthy choices. Salads are available, low-fat milk is on the menu, baked potatoes with a variety of toppings are choices, lean meat and chicken sandwiches are available, and whole grain bread products are showing up.

Order sandwiches to be as simple as possible. The "supers" and double deckers give much more than you need - more calories, more fat, more sodium. Request that mayonnaise or other dressings be left off your sandwich. Use deep-fried foods sparingly. The more you do to create your food, such as adding your own toppings, dressings and sauces, the better off you will be.

Think through the menu before you arrive so that you won't be swayed off course by making a last minute decision.

Keep Food Safe to Eat

One final word about eating out. Be sure your food is cooked to a proper degree of doneness. If not, send it back. Don't take risks with the food you eat. When taking home leftover food, be sure that you will be able to get it into proper refrigeration within one to two hours to avoid possible food contamination. If not, it's better to leave it at the restaurant.

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